MARGARET GARNER
by Delores M. Walters, Ph.D.

On January 28, 1856, Margaret Garner was facing recapture and return to slavery, when she killed her two-year-old daughter, and attempted to kill her other three children, in order to prevent them from being re-enslaved. Described as an unnamed “mulatto” on the 1850 Slave Census, Margaret was an enslaved domestic on the Archibald K. Gaines farm in Richwood (Boone County), Kentucky. Pregnant and 22 years old at the time of her escape, Margaret was accompanied by her husband Robert Garner, 21 years old, his parents and her four children, ages 9 months to 6 years. The family fled from Kentucky in record cold temperatures, crossing the frozen Ohio River into Cincinnati, Ohio. Underlying the escape plan was Robert’s familiarity with Cincinnati, less than twenty miles away. Robert was enslaved on the farm of James Marshall, near the Gaines estate, but was often hired out as a laborer, and also marketed hogs in Cincinnati. Upon arriving in the city, the Garners took refuge with Margaret’s cousin, Elijah Kite, who was to obtain instructions from Quaker abolitionist Levi Coffin for the family’s safe passage via the Underground Railroad. Instead, the runaways were surrounded by a U.S. marshal’s party, which included Gaines and Marshall’s son, and jailed.

Because Margaret Garner was subject to the terms of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 and was also liable for the murder by the state of Ohio, the trial became the longest fugitive slave case of this era, pitting a free state against the United States. Intense drama in the courtroom (which excluded Black spectators) riveted the nation for almost a month. The Garners’ lawyer, John Jolliffe, argued that the family was entitled to their freedom, as both Margaret and Robert had previously been taken to Cincinnati by their respective slaveholders. Jolliffe also reasoned that the jury in a murder trial would sympathize with allegations that Margaret had been subjected to long-standing sexual abuse by Archibald Gaines. Insinuations of sexual abuse were never formalized. However, in a speech delivered in the courtroom, Lucy Stone, a feminist abolitionist, pointed to the appearance of Margaret’s children as “evidence” of the rapes and Gaines’s paternity. Newspaper and census reports describe the youngest children as “mulatto,” “bright mulatto” or “almost white.” Steven Weisenburger in his study, Modern Medea: A Family Story of Slavery and Child-Murder From the Old South (1998) theorizes that sexual violation explains Margaret’s motivation for running away and infanticide, finding that Margaret’s pregnancies occurred after Archibald Gaines arrived in Richwood and were concurrent with his wife’s pregnancies. As Weisenburger further notes, Gaines’s extreme reaction to seeing the murdered toddler was also telling. Margaret was never tried for the child’s murder. Ironically, a federal Commissioner (judge) overruled a state’s right to prosecute for murder and upheld the Fugitive Slave Law supporting slavery. Consequently, the family was remanded to their Kentucky slaveholders and sold to a plantation in Mississippi where Margaret died of typhoid fever, sometime in 1858.

The Garner case symbolizes Black women’s determination to resist their enslavement. In a single act of defiance, Margaret destroyed the master’s “property” and his progeny. The dynamics of slavery in which race, gender and class play a significant role, help to explain Margaret’s infanticide, her resistance to enslavement and likely her resolve to
escape from sexual exploitation and physical abuse. Nineteenth century interpretations of the tragic story include a poem by Frances E.W. Harper, a freeborn African American woman, called “The Slave Mother, A Tale of the Ohio,” and another by Elizabeth Barrett Browning called “The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point” as well as Thomas Satterwhite Noble’s 1867 painting, *The Modern Medea*. The power of Margaret’s actions is also capturing the attention of contemporary artists and scholars. Toni Morrison’s Pulitzer-Prize winning 1987 novel, *Beloved*, which was made into a movie (1998), explores child-murder as a solution to the horrors of slavery, as does the previously mentioned nonfiction account of Weisenburger. Morrison has also written the libretto for *Margaret Garner*, an opera with music by Richard Danielpour, scheduled to open in 2005. Yet, despite various artistic and other renditions of the Garner story, the public markers and gravestones in Richwood, Kentucky, are reserved for the Gaines and Marshall families and their descendants. No public salutary acknowledgment exists in Richwood today to commemorate the heroic attempt by the Garners to obtain freedom.

References

“The Fugitive Slave Case,” in *The Cincinnati Gazette*, February 11, 1856, p. 3


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